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Lifelong learning and vocational education and training: values, social capital and caring in work-based learning provision

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Abstract

The two main objectives of lifelong learning policy, theory and practice in Britain – and also to a large extent in Europe and Australasia (Hyland, 1999; Field & Liecester, 2000) – are the development of vocational skills to enhance economic productivity, and the fostering of social inclusion and civic cohesion. Direct links are made between inclusion and economic prosperity in the 'vision of a society where high skills, high rewards and access to education and training are open to everyone' (DfES,2001,p.6). Although this policy does, to some degree, represent a change from the rampant neo-liberalism of the 1980s and 1990s in Britain, the promotion of economic capital always has pride of place and there is a real danger that the social capital objectives of contemporary vocational education and training (VET) may be neglected in the obsession with economic competitiveness (Hyland, 2002). Since work-based learning (WBL) is now a central element in most current VET policy initiatives in Britain, it is suggested that attention to the systematic management and support of learning on WBL programmes – with due emphasis given to the important social values dimension of vocationalism – can go some way to achieving the crucial social objectives of lifelong learning.

Introduction

In the halcyon early years of the New Labour government in Britain the slogan 'lifelong learning' was chosen to characterise and publicise the values and policies for education and training under the new administration (DfEE,1998). Similar concepts informed the reform programmes of other European countries, particularly those influenced by 'third way' politics (Hyland,2002a). The concept of lifelong learning was, however, by no means a 1990s construction. Like its popular predecessor – the 'learning society' – it had been appropriated from the adult education tradition (Edwards,1997) in order to prescribe a conception of learning from the cradle to the grave or, as Henry Morris once put it, with the aim of 'raising the school leaving age to 90' (Kellner,1998,p.15). All this was meant to replace the ineffective and outdated mainstream school-centred or 'front-loading' model of educational provision.

However, apart from this opposition to the traditional schooling model, contemporary versions of lifelong learning are rather different from those associated with the older adult education traditions of *education permanente* and 'recurrent education'. In an editorial celebrating its 17th year of publication the International Journal of Lifelong Education rejoiced in the fact that 'lifelong education has really come to the fore in the educational vocabulary in recent years' (IJLE, 1995,p.69). The editors went on, however, to deplore the fact that this conception is 'increasingly being equated with continuing education and related rather specifically to vocational updating' (ibid.). Such comments reflect the policy trends of the last few decades which have produced a 'vocationalisation' (Hyland, 1999) of all educational provision from school to university to the extent that the 'economistic' (Avis, et al, 1996) purposes of learning are given pride of place to the detriment of the broader intellectual, social and cultural functions of state systems (Skilbeck, et al, 1994).

Tight (1998) offers the view that the concept has become part of a trinity – lifelong learning, the learning organisation and the learning society – aimed at 'articulating the importance of continuing learning for survival and development at the levels of the individual, the organisation and society as a whole' (p.254). Although providing useful insights, this conception does raise some problematic issues. There is, for example, some legitimacy in the economistic versions of learning when applied to industry and commerce, but there is no explanation as to why this vocationalist/ economic thrust has also come to predominate individualist and societal perspectives. Although lifelong learning is increasingly linked in government policy documents with skills training and global economic competitiveness, the concept does not, as Strain (1998) points out, normally carry such technicist and utilitarian connotations.

In addition to noting these important shifts of emphasis in policy discourse, it is also worth marking the subtle shift of emphasis from lifelong *education* (used in the older adult education tradition) and lifelong *learning* (the preferred term in the current lexicon). As Field (2000) has observed, education implies a formal system of provision supplied and funded by the state whereas learning suggests something more informal and less dependent upon government organisation and finance. This is why the key vision of fostering a new culture of learning and aspiration may be described as a 'soft objective' which places most of the responsibility for its achievement on individuals and communities. Indeed, the primary economic thrust of lifelong learning policy is directly derived from the 'new governance' strategy which

'places the responsibility on citizens to plan and develop their capacity for earning a living' (pp.222-3).

Perspectives on Lifelong Learning

The policy slogan dominating discourse throughout the 1980s and early 1990s just prior to the lifelong learning era was that of the 'learning society', and its evolution serves to illustrate clearly how economistic perspectives transformed educational language, policy and practice in state provision. Barnett (1998, pp.14-15) examined four different interpretations of the learning society in his critical analysis of the 1997 Dearing Report on higher education:

1) the continuing replenishment of human capital so as to maintain and strengthen society's economic capital;
2) the maintenance of cultural capital and the quality of life of individuals and the collective;
3) the inculcation of democratic citizenship;
4) An emancipatory conception aimed at fostering self-reflexive learners who can respond to change in a rational and creative manner.

His conclusion about these prescriptions was that the:

> Dearing conception of the learning society is the *economic* conception…but with a human face. Individual learning and development are to be welcomed but principally for their contribution to the growth of economic capital (ibid.,p.15, original italics).

Dearing's preference for an economistic model – on the grounds that 'in the future, competitive advantage for advanced societies will lie in the quality, effectiveness and relevance of their provision for education and training' (Dearing, 1997, para.34) – though some way short of the most extreme utilitarian conceptions of the learning society, accurately reflects the culture shift in educational aims and values that has occurred in Britain over the last few decades (typically dated from the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan's, Ruskin College speech in 1976; see Hyland, 1994, pp.3ff). Indeed, as Field (2000b) has argued, there is now a 'global consensus' on the need to embed lifelong learning in modern industrial states, and this new emphasis can be seen as the 'natural outcome of the dramatic economic and technological changes that have overwhelmed the world system since the 1960s' (pp.2-3).

In earlier times the economic function of education was merely one – and not necessarily the principal one - of a number of aims and objectives of national systems. The Robbins Report (1963) on higher education, for example – though

mentioning vocational preparation – was concerned chiefly with the intellectual, cultural and social purposes of education. Similar values informed the Russell report (DES, 1973) on adult education and, going further back, were predominant in the post-First Word War report of the Ministry of reconstruction (1919) which saw adult education as a 'permanent necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, [which] therefore should be universal and lifelong' (p.5). All this is a long way from current conceptions of lifelong learning neatly summed up in the then Secretary of State's comments on the 1998 Green paper, *The Learning Age*, in which it was observed that:

> the ability to manage and use information is becoming the key to the competitive strength of advanced economies. With increasing globalisation, the best way of getting and keeping a job will be to have the skills needed by employers…For individuals who want security in employment and a nation that must compete worldwide, learning is the key (Blunkett, 1998,p.18).

Similar sentiments have informed New Labour policy throughout subsequent DfEE policy documents since then and, of course, are reflected in the obsession with employability skills in contemporary discourse about education and training, including the change of the DfEE name to the Department of Education and Skills (DfES). Once the Secretary of State becomes officially responsible for 'skills' as well as 'education', there can be little doubt what the priorities are going to be (and, indeed, these are clearly reflected in the work of the National Skills Task Force , DfEE, 2000a,b). This emphasis is also present in the recent Foster Report (2005) on English further education (FE) colleges which recommends a 'core focus on skills and employability' with the aim of 'increasing the pool of employable people and sharing with other providers the role of enhancing business productivity'(p.2).

Myths and Ideologies in Lifelong Learning

Although a number of commentators have described the idea of lifelong learning and the learning society as, on the one hand, a 'myth' which has 'no real prospect of coming into existence in the foreseeable future' (Hughes & Tight, 1998, p.188) or, on the other, a spectacular example of 'idealist educational discourse' (Rikowski,1998, p.223) which is unhistorical and indeterminate, there is now sufficient policy documentation and analysis around to allow for the identification of distinctive models of VET associated with the principal themes and conceptions. Young (1998) is surely correct to suggest that the different versions of the learning society are 'essentially contested' , reflecting 'different interests' and 'different visions for the future' (p.193).

In earlier work (Hyland,2000) I analysed various leading 'contestants' (Edwards, 1997; Young 1998) in the learning society policy field, and made use of Ranson's (1998,pp. 2-10) work which identified the following components:

1) A society in which learning is a means of coping with structural social, economic and political change so as to ensure stability and continuity;
2) A society which utilises learning to support educational changes linked to increased expectations and participation and to keep pace with technological, communication and epistemological transformations;
3) A comprehensive system of continuing education which unites all forms of school and post-school learning through the idea that learning and wider aspects of social life are part of an integrated whole;
4) A final stage in which learning supports a democratic community which incorporates genuine equality of opportunity and parity of esteem for all forms of education and training.

Such a typology offers us a kind of stage-development model of how a learning society – or a society committed to lifelong learning – might emerge. Until the conditions of one stage are met, it is not feasible to deal with the criteria and requirements of any subsequent stage. This may be illustrated by the diagram below:

INDIVIDUAL [Self]	basic minimum curriculum – employment skills – utilitarian ends
	updating skills - VET for global competition – broad vocationalism
[society] COMMUNITY	learning culture – vocational/academic unity – educative learning

The general developmental direction of policy and practice is from narrow skills training for individuals (basic skills, occupationally-specific national vocational qualifications, NVQs) towards a broader vocationalism (general NVQs, vocational A-levels) to wider social, cultural and moral objectives linked to a socially just community. This latter is what Young (1998) calls the 'educative' model, and may be linked to Winch's (2000) discussion of social values in relation to VET in which social capital is seen as being:

> Constituted through the social relationships that people have with each other, through the collective knowledge of a group, and the moral, cognitive and social supervision that the

group exercises over its members…Social capital in this sense has a strongly moral dimension…often described as the norms of trust prevalent within a society (p.5).

Such a vision – what I have described as a 'social theory of lifelong learning' (Hyland, 2000,pp.127ff) – can be identified in official government policy documents in the field. However, such notions of broad, inclusive learning tend to be submerged beneath the welter of material on skills training and the economistic aims of education and training. Recent developments in work-based learning (WBL) do, however, offer some scope and opportunity to re-assert the importance and value of the moral and social dimension of VET.

Work-Based Learning

WBL has always been an essential ingredient of VET programmes though, arguably, it has never been accorded the prominence it now has in both Europe and Australasia (Symes & McIntrye, 2000). In Britain, high quality 'work-based training is at the heart of the Government's 14-19 agenda' (DfES, 2001,p.2), and WBL is central to a whole host of current policy initiatives including new vocational qualifications for schools and further education, Foundation Degrees
and newly reconstructed Modern Apprenticeships (LSC, 2001). At the tertiary level universities are being asked to 'build bridges between the campus and employers' to achieve the 'ambitious goal of vocational excellence for all (DfEE,2001, pp.9-10). Described by Boud & Symes (2000) as 'an idea whose time has come' and an 'acknowledgement that work…is imbued with learning opportunities'(pp.14-15), WBL has emerged as one of the key features of VET reform as national systems of education respond to the demands of the global competition and the so-called knowledge economy. Its essential features are derived from a number of sources connected with the notion of the learning organisation, the integration of theory and practice in workplace knowledge and skills, and the need to respond positively to the challenges of knowledge creation in the light of the information technology revolution global economic developments. The fundamental theoretical educational premise is that 'the workplace is a crucially important site for learning and for access to learning' (Evans, et al, 2002,p.1).

In the study of WBL by Seagraves (1996) distinctions were made between learning *for* work (general VET courses), learning *at* work (in-house training, work experience, continuing professional development), and learning *through* work (the application of job-related knowledge and skills to work tasks, traineeships and

apprenticeships of various kinds). As Brennan & Little (1996) suggest, in 'higher education terms, learning for work may well incorporate elements of learning at work and learning through work' (p.5), all of which are included in 'policies that have fostered more "realistic" forms of university curricula designed to meet the needs of the changing workforce' and the 'fulfilment of career aspiration' (Boud & Symes, 2000, p.15) for students in FE and HE. In investigating these new perspectives, Barnett (2002) reminds us that, although 'work and learning are not synonymous', the 'two concepts overlap' since:

> Work can and should offer learning opportunities; much learning is demanding calling on the learner to yield to certain standards, and contains the character of work…the challenge here is that of bringing about the greatest overlap between work and learning (p.19).

This idealistic and positive vision needs, however, to be qualified by the realities of the contemporary workplace which – as research by the National Skills Taskforce (DfEE,2000) and the large-scale Learning Society Project (Coffield, 2000) has indicated – typically provide few opportunities for meaningful employee learning. Although many of the larger UK firms do encourage and support employee development if various kinds, it is still the case that – as Ashton et al (2000) report – 'something like two-thirds of the work force do not work in such organisations; (p.222). Similar findings in relation to the appallingly low level of employee training apply especially to small businesses which account for 95% of British firms and around 35% of total employment (Hyland & Matlay, 1998). The renewed emphasis on WBL at all levels of the system may serve to address some of these issues.

Social and Economic Capital

Research on the way in which people acquire knowledge, skills and values in new settings – particularly in workplaces in which novice learners are negotiating entry into communities of practice and culture – have confirmed the central importance of social as opposed to individualised learning, even in the sphere of information technology in which individualised strategies have predominated (Guile & Hayton,1999). The development of vocational knowledge and skill in particular seems to require attention – not just to formal knowledge and disciplines – but to the 'social and cultural context in which cognitive activity occurs' (Billett, 1996, p.150).

Drawing on the 'activity theory' of psychologists such as Vygotsky and Luria, a conception of 'work as practical action' (Jackson, 1993,p.171) developed in the 1980s, and the new perspectives have been utilised extensively in recent years as a way of acknowledging and analysing learning in a variety of diverse social contexts.

Wenger (2002) usefully reminds us that:

> Since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that share cultural practices reflecting their collective learning: from a tribe round a cave fire, to a medieval guild…to a community of engineers…Participating in these 'communities of practice; is essential to our learning (p.163).

What Lave & Wenger (2002) call 'legitimate peripheral participation' concerns the ways in which newcomers or novices in various fields – and, interestingly, workplace learning through forms of apprenticeship is cited as a paradigm case here – come to acquire the knowledge, culture and values that enables them to progress from being outsiders to insiders. It is argued that 'newcomers participate in a community of practitioners as well as in productive activity' and that it is important to view 'learning as part of a social practice' (pp.121-122). They go on to observe that:

> The social relations of apprentices within a community change their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices' understanding and knowledgeable skills develop…newcomers' legitimate peripherality provides them with more than an 'observational' lookout post: it crucially involves *participation* as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed – in the culture of practice'
> (p.113, original emphasis).

Moreover as Guile & Young (2002) have suggested, the concept of apprenticeship development has significant implications for the content and contexts as well as the processes of learning. They point to the serious limitations of the traditional learning approaches in this sphere – based upon the 'transmission model' – which need to be supplemented by strategies which concentrate on the 'processes of work-based learning and the skill development that take place within the institution of apprenticeship' (pp.149-50). Similar points have been made by, for example, Ranson (1998) who suggests that all learning is 'inescapably a social creation'(p.20)., and also by Harkin, et al (2001) who argue that 'effective learning is facilitated by social interaction' and 'has its basis in the relationships which exist between people' (pp.52-3). There are important continuities between formal (school, college) and informal (workplace) learning and knowledge which need to be emphasised here to develop models of what Bloomer & Hodkinson (1997) have termed 'studentship' and learning careers'. Hager (2000) makes similar proposals in arguing for a conception of workplace knowledge which moves away from formal, disciplinary forms towards a model of WBL based upon 'people learning to make judgements'(p.60) across a range of different contexts.

Developing Social Capital on WBL Programmes

It could be argued that WBL strategies – in addition to fostering the occupational knowledge and skills which underpin economic capital – can also facilitate the

development of that valuable social capital which is, for Schuller & Field (1998), located in the 'kinds of contexts and culture that promote communication and mutual learning as part of the fabric of everyday life' (p.234). The interdependence of economic and social capital can also be discerned in the social practices of successful learning organisations in which group and team work helps to produce a 'synthesis of members' interests' (Zuboff, 988,p.394) in addition to that 'collective intelligence' (Brown & Lauder, 1995,p.28) essential for survival and renewal. Moreover, since the development of vocational knowledge and skills requires grounding in the 'social sources' and 'communities of practice' in which it is 'acquired and deployed' (Billett,1996, p.151), WBL serves as an ideal vehicle for the personal and social development of learners that helps to foster those broader skills, values and attitudes required for working life.

In terms of these broader, so-called 'soft skills' – particularly those which constitute the interpersonal dimension of key skills such as 'working with others' which also feature in many other post-16 vocational courses reflecting the renewed interest in citizenship education (OCR/RSA,2001) – there is evidence that WBL processes are well equipped to facilitate the group and team working required in this sphere. The work of Engestrom (1996), for instance, describes how the social transformation of work by project teams can serve to produce new collective understandings of tasks and processes and, hence, new knowledge. Similar benefits were noted in projects seeking to incorporate team working through work placements on undergraduate programmes (Rossin & Hyland, 2003). The organic integration of social and economic goals in VET is well illustrated in projects managed by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (Kilpatrick, et al, 1999). Concerned with small farming businesses which combine as collectives – learning organisations called *Executive Link* – the aim of the project was to facilitate non-formal training and business development as farmers tried to cope with innovation and new technology. The results demonstrated that – not only were the training objectives of the collective boards more easily realised through group activity – but that such shared planning and development also achieved important social capital aims in furthering trust and identification with the local community. As the researchers conclude:

> The learning processes that occur in the Executive Link community are oiled by the social capital of the community. Executive Link has been set up as a learning community, and a deliberate effort has been made to build networks, commitment and shared values. These elements of social capital have been built through the development of shared language, shared experiences, trust, self-development and fostering an identification with the community (pp.142-3).

Values, Caring and VET Provision

Notwithstanding new emphases on citizenship and social values in contemporary UK educational policy, VET is still overly influenced by the 'new vocationalist' thrust of the 1990s which has resulted in a one-dimensional, technicist approach – reflected in the obsession with skills and competences (Hyland & Merrill, 2003) – which marginalises broader educational aims and values. Correctly described as 'morally impoverished' (Fish, 993, p.10), this approach to VET – if it allows for the discussion of values at all – tends to generate a largely uncritical and mechanistic approach in which something called 'moral competence' (Wright, 1989; Hyland, 1992) is recommended as a means of ensuring that young workers develop the values, attitudes and personal qualities required by employers. Indeed. It is remarkable that – in spite of radical and dramatic changes which transformed education and training in general and the post-school sector in particular in recent years – there has been very little discussion of the overarching values framework in which all this hectic development has taken place.

However, in spite of the predominance of the economistic model – which has left largely unexamined ideological conceptions of learning as a commodity to be competed for by self-interested consumers in search of employability skills (Avis, et al, 1996) – we have also been asked to believe that such an ethos was in some sense 'value-neutral' (Halliday, 1996) and that educational judgments consisted in simply deciding upon the most cost-efficient means of achieving universally agreed ends concerned with enhancing economic competitiveness both for individuals and for society. Such notions are both morally and pragmatically bankrupt. Conceptions of work, employment, and VET cannot be separated from value conceptions about what constitutes a a just or good society. As Harkin, et al, (2001) argue 'education systems reflect the nature of the society in which they exist…a fundamental link between the nature of society and the nature of its education provision is therefore demonstrable'(p.139). Moreover, in purely pragmatic terms the struggle to forge links between visions of the 'good' (socially just, inclusive) society and educational 'goods' which might foster this are evident in the constant changes of policy by government over the last decade or so, culminating in the most recent DfES (2005) White Paper which effectively rejected a consensus surrounding ways of bridging the vocational/academic divide which has bedevilled VET in Britain for over a century (Hyland,2002b)

To ensure that the social dimension of lifelong learning and VET is given due emphasis we can do no better than start with Coffield's (1997) definition of a 'social theory of learning' which can help to 'build a Britain worth living in and for, a prosperous, just and cohesive society for all age groups and all sections of the population'(p,20). In the pursuit of this goal VET policies need to be informed by the idea examined by Ranson (1994) that the development of a 'learning society will depend upon the creation of a more strenuous social order' since the 'values of learning…are actually moral values that express a set of virtues required of the self but also of others in relationship with the self' (p.109).

In relation to VET in particular such a project will look to the 'shared values' which underpin our common 'understanding of why productive work is a fundamental condition of human life' (Skilbeck, et al, 1994,p.50), or, indeed, of the wider quality of social life, including work, which we want to cultivate and support. Taking Dewey's (1966) broad conception of vocational education as a process which seeks to break down the 'antithesis of vocational and cultural education' informed by the false dualisms of 'labour and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind'(p.307) so as to 'acknowledge the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation'(p.318), I have elsewhere (Hyland, 1998; 1999) developed an outline for a VET programme which gives due emphasis to the values dimension. In relation to lifelong learning it is worth identifying two elements in particular: the importance of studentship/learning careers on VET programmes, and the need to link VET with the values associated with caring and community.

Studentship and Learning Careers

The importance of WBL as a way of introducing students to communities of practice was mentioned earlier in relation to social capital conceptions of lifelong learning. Unfortunately research studies on the management and organisation of WBL on modern apprenticeships (Unwin & Wellington,2001) and on Welfare to Work schemes (Hyland & Musson,2001) have indicated that this aspect of post-school VET is often badly co-ordinated and poorly managed. If lifelong learning goals are to be achieved through WBL and VET programmes, models of student learning based on what Bloomer (1996) has called a person's 'learning career' which often follows – not the neat and tidy linear pathway assumed by career guidance conceptions of rational planning – but one which is able to respond creatively and pragmatically to the diversity of factors facing post-16 learners of all kinds. To deal with such real-world contingencies, Bloomer suggests a concept of 'studentship' which, in general terms, refers to the 'variety of ways in which students can exert influence over the

curriculum in the creation and confirmation of their own personal learning careers' (p.140). Such a conception allows – in ways similar to Young's (1999) notion of curriculum 'connectivity' designed to forge links between all forms of learning, knowledge and experience – for that continuity of achievement and progress which is vital to both the social and economic dimensions of lifelong learning.

Caring and Community Values

The social theory of lifelong learning outlined above incorporated a movement from an individualist to a communitarian conception of education and society. In spite of the social inclusion agenda which has featured in lifelong learning policy since the late 1990s, the individualist legacy – linked with monocultural nation-state economic liberalism of the 1980s and early 1990s – still exerts too much of an influence on VET policy and practice. Although Fairclough (2000) has identified the influence of 'communitarian discourse' (p.37) on New Labour policy, there is little evidence of this in recent educational policy. If all aspects of the lifelong learning agenda are to be realised, this strand of thinking needs to be reinforced. Arthur (1998) has explained the principal features of communitarian philosophy in the belief that:

> Neither human existence nor individual liberty can be sustained for long outside the interdependent and overlapping communities to which we all belong. Nor can any community survive for long unless its members dedicate some of their attention, energy and resources to shared projects. The exclusive pursuit of private interest erodes the network of social environments on which we all depend (pp.358-9).

Exploring similar issues, Rozema (2001) has explained how different conceptions of human economy lead to different perspectives on the nature and purpose of education. On the one hand there is the 'economy of profit' with 'information as the commodity which education provides…as a means to profit and power' and which views the 'student as consumer' (p.238). Against this there is the 'economy of community' which seeks to:

> foster persons who will maintain and preserve the essential characteristics of community [and] will inevitable gravitate towards the practice and personification of proper care: for one's family, friends, neighbours and countrymen…What gets taught and how it gets taught will be determined and shaped by the idea that an education – like friendship, citizenship or marriage – cannot be bought or sold, only given and received (p.252).

The concept of caring is crucial here to the cultivation of values relevant to social capital. In her examination of post-school education and training since the post-1944 settlement in the UK, Cripps (2002) usefully distinguished between the 'market' (consumer/commodity/commercial emphases) and 'caring' (equality/diversity/service concerns) codes which have characterised the sector over the last few decades, and concludes with an expression of regret at the dominance of the former which has created a 'parity of difference' (p.87) which has devalued vocational learning by

hierarchically differentiating between types of student achievement. She argues that 'placing further education colleges in a competitive market appears to serve neither the individual, employers, nor national need (p.269). More recently, Tuckett (2005) has suggested that the government's rejection of the Tomlinson proposals for 14-19 reform 'marks a low point in Labour's journey towards a lifelong learning culture' (p.23). In making a recovery from such a low point, there has never been a more important time to reassert the traditional 'caring' functions of education and training at all levels. A social theory of lifelong learning using the vehicle of WBL can provide the means to achieve this in the crucial area of VET.

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